

Report on Vermont's "School Readiness Assessment Initiative": 2007-2008

Assessing progress as a state or community on the outcome, "Children Are Ready for School," has posed a challenge, not only in Vermont but across the country. There is a diversity of views on what "readiness" consists of and how it should be measured. However, some consensus is emerging around several key ideas.

One is that "readiness" is a shared responsibility of families, schools, and communities. *Children* need to be "ready" to take advantage of the learning opportunities of formal schooling, but *schools* also need to be prepared to meet the varied needs with which children enter school. *Communities* need to support children and families through providing access to high-quality early care and education programs, by supporting parents as children's first teachers, and by ensuring that all children receive adequate preventive and ongoing health care.

This report shares information from the seventh year of a multi-part assessment of "school readiness," conducted throughout Vermont in the 2007-08 school year. The assessment gathered information from kindergarten teachers on children's readiness in the fall of the year. Information from teachers and school principals on their schools' readiness for young children and their families is also included here. The specific measures were the subject of extensive development and pilot-testing, drawing on the resources of the Vermont Early Childhood Workgroup, the Early Childhood Councils, and researchers at the University of Vermont.

Characteristics of the sample

The assessment was intended to include all children in public school kindergarten in Vermont, their teachers, and their principals. Valid data were received from 390 kindergarten teachers (93 percent of the 421 contacted). Teachers in all but four of Vermont's 60 supervisory unions responded. Child-level data were submitted on 4,901 kindergartners, which is 80 percent of estimated kindergarten enrollment. Of the principals contacted, 92 percent responded.

<i>Respondents</i>	<i>Number Responding</i>	<i>Estimated Pool of Possible Respondents</i>	<i>Percent Responding</i>
KG Teachers	390	421	92.6
Children (KG teacher report)	4,901	6,161	79.5
KG Principals	211	230	91.7

Of course, not all respondents answered every item on the instruments, so the number of valid responses varies somewhat by item.

Following is a summary of some key characteristics of children, teachers, and schools, as reported by the responding teachers and principals.

<i>Kindergarten Teachers</i>	
Mean length of experience with KG teaching (years)	10.7
Mean length experience with teaching (total) (years)	17.3
Have elementary education license	93.6%
Have early childhood endorsement	28.7%
Teach half-day program	10.8%
Teach full-day, 5 days/wk. program	73.6%
Teach full-day, partial-week program	1.8%
<i>Kindergarten Students</i>	
Qualifies for special education services	8.9%
Qualifies for ESL/Bi-lingual services	2.5%
Qualifies for Sec. 504 services	1.3%
Teacher reports on child's experience prior to kindergarten:	
Was in regulated early childhood program	72.8%
Was not in regulated early childhood program	16.0%
"Don't know"	8.9%
Missing response	2.2%
<i>Schools</i>	
In communities that offer preK funded through ADM	69.2%
Mean average class size	13.4
Average typical child:adult ratio in kindergarten	9.1

Teachers

Looking first at teachers who responded, their years of experience teaching kindergarten ranged from 0 to 34 years (*mean*=10.7), although a majority reported ten or fewer years' experience. They had an average of 17 years' total teaching experience. 94 percent reported having an elementary education license, and 29 percent reported having an early childhood endorsement. The largest share of teachers (74 percent) taught a full-day, full-time program; 11 percent reported teaching a half-day program; two percent taught a full-day, partial week program; and 14 percent indicated some other type of schedule.

Children

Turning to characteristics of the kindergarten children, 8.1 percent were noted by their teachers as qualifying for special education services; 2.5 percent qualified for ESL/bi-lingual services, and 1.3 percent for 504 services. With regard to children's pre-school experiences, 73 percent of children were reported as having attended a regulated early childhood program prior to kindergarten; 16 percent were reported as not having had such experience, and for 9 percent teachers reported they did not know this information.

Schools

The mean average kindergarten class size reported by principals was 13.4 students; however, 25 percent of principals reported an average class size of 17 or more. The average "typical" child:adult ratio for kindergarten reported by principals was 9.1; this includes teachers, aides, and other adults in the classroom. 69 percent reported that their community offers ADM-funded preK services in school-based or school-linked programs. 52 percent reported that their action

planning process addresses kindergarten issues, and 27 percent reported that it addresses pre-K issues. The most common kindergarten eligibility cut-off date was Aug. 31/Sept. 1, named by 92 percent of principals; 5 percent named Dec. 31/Jan. 1, and 0.5 percent named some other date or process.

“Ready Kindergartners”

Kindergarten teachers were asked to rate individual children on 28 items encompassing the domains of “social and emotional development,” “approaches to learning,” “communication,” “cognitive development and general knowledge,” and “physical health and well-being.” Teachers were asked not to assess children directly, but to rely on their (teachers’) accumulated observations 4-6 weeks into the school year. These assessments were not intended as screening or diagnostic tools for individual children, but rather for purposes of creating an aggregate-level picture of children’s readiness.

An example of items included under “social and emotional development” is *“Can meet/play with different children his/her own age.”* An example of items included under “approaches to learning” is *“Appears enthusiastic and interested in classroom activities.”* An example of items included under “communication” is *“communicates needs, wants, or thoughts in primary language.”* An example of items included under “cognitive development and general knowledge” is *“shows awareness of how books are organized and used.”* An example of items included under “physical health and well-being” is *“demonstrates self-help skills (e.g., toileting, wiping nose, washing hands).”* Beginning in 2004-05, some items from earlier surveys were eliminated or re-worded, and other items were added to the “cognitive development & general knowledge” domain. In 2006-07, the item formerly worded as “Shows ability to discriminate and identify speech sounds” was changed to “Shows beginning awareness of letter/sound correspondence.” Because of these changes, results cannot be directly compared to those of previous years.

Response-choices for most items were “don’t know,” “not observed,” “beginning,” “practicing,” and “performing independently.” Note that in the following table, the percentages listed for four of the domains indicate children who were rated as “practicing” or “performing independently” on *all* items within the domain.

Social and Emotional Development				
Pct. “Practicing” or “Performing Independently” on <i>all</i> items				61.9
	Pct. “Not Observed”	Pct. “Beginning”	Pct. “Practicing”	Pct. “Performing Independently”
Can meet/play with different children	0.9	14.4	32.7	52.1
Uses problem-solving skills in social situations	5.8	27.1	39.8	27.3
Separates easily from caregiver	1.9	8.0	18.6	71.5
Appropriately expresses emotions	2.8	15.9	31.2	50.1
Adapts to transitions	1.2	13.2	28.1	57.5
Interacts positively with adults	0.7	9.9	26.0	63.4
Approaches to Learning				
Pct. “Practicing” or “Performing Independently” on <i>all</i> items				44.1
	Pct. “Not Observed”	Pct. “Beginning”	Pct. “Practicing”	Pct. “Performing Independently”
Follows simple rules	1.5	16.5	32.1	50.0
Persists with self-directed activity	2.9	14.8	27.3	55.0
Appears enthusiastic	1.3	12.2	29.9	56.5
Uses a variety of problem-solving strategies	4.9	22.1	35.6	37.5
Pays attention	3.5	21.2	31.9	43.4
Knows how and when to use adults	2.1	16.8	35.3	45.8
Initiates activities in the classroom	3.8	16.8	31.5	47.9
Is curious	3.6	15.7	30.2	50.5
Communication				
Pct. “Practicing” or “Performing Independently” on <i>all</i> items				78.9
	Pct. “Not Observed”	Pct. “Beginning”	Pct. “Practicing”	Pct. “Performing Independently”
Communicates needs	2.4	14.7	28.1	54.9
Understands simple directions	1.4	10.9	23.5	64.2
Engages in conversation	1.1	12.3	24.5	62.1
Cognitive Development/General Knowledge				
Pct. “Practicing” or “Performing Independently” on <i>all</i> items				51.7
	Pct. “Not Observed”	Pct. “Beginning”	Pct. “Practicing”	Pct. “Performing Independently”
Shows awareness of how books are organized and used	1.7	15.1	24.8	58.4
Can recall and explain sequences of events	6.6	19.1	30.0	44.1
Recognizes name in print	1.5	9.8	17.2	71.5
Engages in imaginative play	2.6	10.4	25.0	62.0
Shows beginning awareness of letter/sound correspondence	9.6	27.5	25.1	37.8
Can identify 10 or more letters of the alphabet	9.7	19.4	18.3	52.5
Uses scribbles, symbols, or letters to write or represent words or ideas	9.0	24.9	25.7	40.4
Shows ability to count 5 or more objects using one-to-one correspondence	3.4	13.0	19.2	64.4
Can identify several basic geometric shapes	4.4	14.5	24.4	56.8

Physical Health and Well-Being				82.8
	Pct. "Not Observed"	Pct. "Beginning"	Pct. "Practicing"	Pct. "Performing Independently"
Demonstrates self-help skills	1.0	5.4	15.0	78.6
Child's ability to learn appears inhibited by:	Pct. "No"	Pct. "Seldom"	Pct. "Sometimes"	Pct. "Often"
illness	91.7	4.2	3.2	0.8
fatigue	84.2	6.5	7.7	1.7
hunger	92.0	4.0	3.1	0.9

On nearly all of the individual competencies rated by teachers, at least three-quarters of children were either "practicing" or "performing independently." This supports the aim that this be a measure of what beginning kindergartners can reasonably be expected to know and do.

There were seven items where fewer than 50 percent of kindergartners were rated as "performing independently":

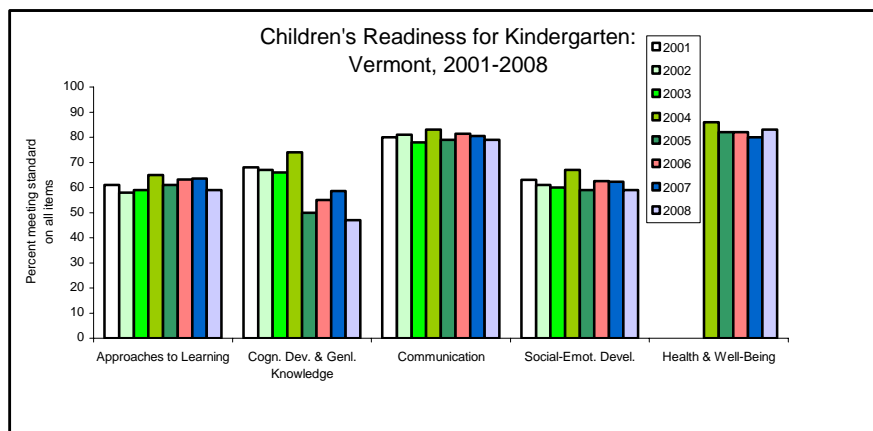
- *uses problem solving skills in social situations*
- *uses a variety of learning strategies*
- *pays attention during teacher-directed group activities*
- *knows how and when to use adults*
- *can recall and explain sequences of events*
- *shows beginning awareness of letter/sound correspondence*
- *uses scribbles, symbols, or letters to write or represent words or ideas*

By item, the percentage of children whose performance teachers indicated was "not observed" ranged from 0.7 to 9.6. Items most likely to be "not observed" were *Can identify 10 or more letters of the alphabet*; *shows beginning awareness of letter/sound correspondence*; and *uses scribbles, symbols, or letters to write or represent words or ideas*.

Slightly more than one-quarter (28 percent) of children were rated at the "practicing" or "performing independently" levels for all items in each of the five domains. 11-26 percent each reached this level on one, two, three, or four domains; 7 percent were not achieving at this level across any of the five domains.

School health data are used to supplement the teacher reports on "physical health and well-being." Specifically, aggregate data on the vision/hearing screening status of first-graders, are reported by school nurses. Data from the 2006-07 school year are included in the Agency of Human Services' 2007 *Community Profiles*.

The following chart shows domain scores for the statewide sample over time. Note that year-to-year comparisons may not be valid, because participation rates varied, and because items were not completely consistent over this time; in particular, additional items comprised the Cognitive Development & General Knowledge domain beginning in 2005. Also, note that the Health & Well-Being domain has been assessed only for the past five years.



“Ready Schools”

The National Education Goals Panel, and others, have identified important features of schools that indicate they are “ready” to accommodate the varied needs and experiences of young children entering school, and their families. According to these experts, “ready schools”

- Smooth the transition between home and school
- Strive for continuity between early care and education programs and elementary school
- Help children learn and make sense of their complex and exciting world
- Are committed to the success of every child
- Are committed to the success of every teacher and every adult who interacts with children during the school day
- Introduce or expand approaches that have been shown to raise achievement
- Are learning organizations that alter practices and programs if they do not benefit children
- Serve children in communities
- Take responsibility for results
- Have strong leadership

Vermont’s assessment of “ready schools” covers four domains: “Smooth Transitions to School,” “Instruction and Staff Development,” “Resources,” and “Partnership with Community,” derived from reports of kindergarten teachers and principals. Together, these address many of the ten characteristics listed above, although we were constrained by what information was practically measurable.

Members of the Vermont Early Childhood Workgroup reviewed the “Ready Schools” instrument, and developed scoring criteria for each of the items making up the four domains. They established a “standard” for each domain that represents their view of what is “best practice” for schools, recognizing that not all schools currently have the resources to reach this level.

Following are the items making up each domain, together with the preferred responses contributing to the domain “standard” (component item-weights available on request), and the percentage of supervisory unions (based on participating teachers and principals) offering each response. For the 2007-08 school year modifications were made to the principal survey, affecting the domains “Instruction & Staff Development” and “Partnership With Community.”

For this reason, as well as because not all schools participate each year, caution is advised in comparing results from year to year.

Smooth Transitions to School		94
Average percent of standard met across participating SUs		
	Respondents (N)	Pct. with preferred response
The following activities are offered before school entry:	Principals (211)	
• Move-up days		56.2
• Welcome notes sent to all kindergartners		86.2
• Registration day		79.5
• Practice bus ride		48.6
• Information packets describing KG distributed to parents		83.3
The following activities are offered before school entry or within the first month of school:	Principals (211)	
• Teacher visits to preschool/child care/parent child centers		75.2
• Kindergarten screening		91.0
• Home visits to each new student		23.4
• Kindergarten open house		94.8
• Telephone calls to all kindergarten parents		47.4
• Classroom visits		66.7
• Parent/child/teacher conferences		61.5
• Transition planning for children with special needs		94.8
• Q-naires sent to all KGs and their parents		55.2

Instruction and Staff Development		
Average percent of standard met across participating SUs		40
	Respondents (N)	Pct. with preferred response
Kindergarten teacher's state endorsement/license	Teachers (390)	
Elementary Education		92.1
Early Childhood Education		29.2
Average kindergarten class size ≤ 16	Principals (211)	Percent 70.7
Kindergarten instructional practices are derived from:		
• Teacher observations		72.0
• Vermont' Framework of Standards		96.2
• School district curriculum		91.5
• Standard testing/outcome data		53.6
• Vermont's Early Learning Standards		73.5
• Parent input		30.8
• Preschool/Head Start/child care teachers		27.0
• Teacher's own resources		73.9
• Discussion of previous year's KG readiness data w/ teachers		28.0
• Discussion of previous year's KG readiness data w/ childcare providers		7.6
• National standards (e.g., NAEYC)		31.8
• Commercial curricula		33.6
Partnership with Community		
Average percent of standard met across participating SUs		59
	Respondents (N)	Pct. with preferred response
School's action-planning process addresses issues of:	Principals (211)	
• Pre-kindergarten		27.1%
• Kindergarten		51.9%
Average number of parents on action-planning team		1.9
School-sponsored activities with at least one-third of parents participating:		
• Open houses		90.0
• Parent-teacher conferences		91.0
• Family "fun" activities (fairs, dinners, dances, etc.)		70.9
• PTA/PTO		26.7
Overall level of kindergarten parent involvement (e.g., classroom volunteers, participation on committees, help with special projects) is at least one-third		71.7

Resources		97
Average percent of standard met across participating SUs		
	Respondents	Pct. with preferred response
Types of support available (may require a wait)	Teachers	
• Professional support		
Colleagues		98.2
Principal		98.0
Parents		97.4
• Specialized services		
Behavior specialist		80.0
School counselor (mental health/guidance)		97.1
Occupational therapist		83.1
Physical therapist		83.8
School nurse		97.9
School psychologist		75.7
School social worker		54.6
Community mental health social worker		66.2
Speech and language therapist		85.1
• Curriculum/instruction		
Curriculum specialist		78.8
Instructional support team		95.7
Reading/literacy specialist		82.6
Special education teacher		96.9